

FROM THE EDITORS

MSIs MATTER: RECOGNIZING WRITING CENTER WORK AT MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS

Karen Keaton Jackson
North Carolina Central University
kkjackson@ncu.edu

Mick Howard
Langston University
mhoward@langston.edu

When we were offered the opportunity to serve as editors of a special section of *Praxis*, we were elated. We think (though we'd have to verify) that this would be the first time post-civil rights era (or perhaps ever) that two HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) faculty served as editors of a mainstream journal in our field, even more specifically one with a focus on HBCUs and other MSIs (Minority Serving Institutions). For years, we have read articles and attended conferences where colleagues from various institutions explored best pedagogies and practices for working with students of color in our composition classrooms and our writing centers. However, the common denominator with many of those colleagues is that they taught at institutions with limited student populations of color. Thus, their ideas either were solely theoretical in nature or, if some practical application occurred, it often was for a short and finite time period or limited in scope.

Many of us at MSIs realized that more voices needed to be included in the discourse, particularly from those of us who work on a daily basis with predominant populations of racially/ethnically diverse students. We think the most fundamental question so many of us have is this: Why are the voices who teach and tutor hundreds, even thousands, of students of color each year not engaged in and, quite frankly, leading these conversations?

The answer to that seemingly simple question actually is quite complicated. If we look back to Keith Gilyard's 1999 *College Composition and Communication* article "African American Contributions to Composition Studies," we see that African American colleagues at HBCUs laid the groundwork for STROL ("Students' Right to Their Own Language") and other initiatives for students of color prior to the Civil War (Gilyard; see also Conference); however, once campuses became more integrated and new job opportunities arose, many of those scholars moved on to predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Another very tangible barrier is the atmosphere of many campuses. For example, HBCUs and Tribal Colleges (TCUs) are primarily teaching institutions, so teaching

loads are heavy (4/4 or 5/5 teaching loads, with many faculty members teaching multiple overloads), committee work is overwhelming, funding for conferences can be difficult to attain, and graduate assistants who help with research efforts are merely an urban legend; many of us were teaching and research assistants in our own graduate programs, yet we rarely see them in real life on our own campuses.

Thus, the works being published here represent true commitment. But, we feel it is important for us to tell our own stories because those at MSIs can accurately reflect the contexts of our institutions. When others attempt to tell our stories, it's almost as if the essence, or the soul, of the piece can be missing. Characteristics of MSIs that can be seen as odd or peculiar to those outside of our settings are very much the norm for us. At many HBCU writing centers, for example, some of our fundamental daily practices are in direct contrast to what mainstream scholarship suggests. And we take pride in that, for to us, context is everything.

It also is important to note that the works published here merely scratch the surface of life at MSIs, for we are not homogeneous institutions. For example, of all of the various types of MSIs, only HBCUs and TCUs were founded specifically for the education of a particular racial/ethnic group—HBCUs for African Americans and TCUs for Native Americans/American Indians. HBCUs were founded after the Civil War when slaves were free, yet still unable to attend PWIs ("Historically Black Colleges & Universities"). The first Tribal College was founded in 1968 on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona ("Tribal Colleges"). Thus, the curriculum, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities all cater to the culture of their student populations. They exhibit what Gloria Ladson-Billings would call a "culturally relevant curriculum," for the students' identities are not at the periphery of the curriculum, but rather fully and consistently integrated. Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) and other MSIs, in contrast, have their governmental designation based on student enrollment from year to year. The required enrollment of that particular cultural

group varies a bit depending upon institution type. HSIs, for example, only need to have a student population that is 25% Hispanic, while HBCUs and TCUs have the majority of their populations composed of a particular ethnic group. Most HBCUs and TCUs have percentages of 70% or higher of their ethnic group (“Minority Serving Institutions Program”). And if we go even further, there are many distinctions even among HBCUs—public vs. private, religious vs. non-religious, land grant vs. non-land grant, small- vs. mid-sized, etcetera.

In short, MSIs cannot be and should not be lumped together as synonymous institutions, for we are hardly that. But, this publication is one step forward in recognizing that our institutions do bring some unique and often silenced perspectives about teaching and tutoring students of color that could benefit our colleagues in any writing center. If anything, it is our hope that this special issue will encourage even more MSI colleagues to share their stories and more PWI colleagues to listen to and value them.

Acknowledgments

We must take a moment to thank our reviewers who spent time reading and offering feedback to our authors:

Dr. Michele Eodice
Oklahoma University

Dr. Genie Nicole Giaimo
The Ohio State University

Dr. Sarah Gray
Missouri Valley College

Dr. Hope Jackson
North Carolina A&T State University

Dr. Robert Randolph
North Carolina A&T State University

Works Cited

- Conference on College Composition & Communication. *Students' Right to Their Own Language*, special issue of *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 25, 1974, pp. 1-32.
- Gilyard, Keith. “African American Contributions to Composition Studies.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1999, pp. 626-644.

- “Historically Black Colleges & Universities and Higher Education Desegregation.” U.S. Department of Education. Mar. 1991. www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/hq9511.html. Accessed 10 Apr. 2019.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria. *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. Jossey-Bass, 1994.
- “Minority Service Institutions Program.” U.S. Department of the Interior: Office of Civil Rights. www.doi.gov/pmb/eeo/doi-minority-serving-institutions-program. Accessed 11 Apr. 2019.
- “Tribal Colleges: Educating, Engaging, Innovating, Sustaining and Honoring.” *American Indian Higher Education Consortium*. www.aihec.org/who-we-are/index.htm. Accessed 10 Apr. 2019.